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ABSTRACT

In light of the huge volume of headline news stories that reflect ethical concerns from a variety of arenas, it is no wonder that ethics training is a hot topic. Research shows that many leading United States companies have written codes of ethics and/or instituted formal ethics training programs. In this paper, certain principles that have become guidelines for one consultant's practice are described. The principles provide, among other things, that: training will not be conducted if it is not needed; a session will not be canceled because of a promise of more money from another source seeking the service; more than can be delivered will not be promised; and each session will be tailored to a specific client or industry. Experience with presentation skills training demonstrates that the consultant should not hold sessions in a format or time period that is inadequate, and should try to change the mindset of a client who insists on an abbreviated format. An assignment should be rejected if it would require association with a poor training session. If the client's motivation in engaging the consultant appears to be questionable, the consultant should not undertake the project. (SG)

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# Ethical Issues in the Consulting Context

## "Ethics in Presentation Skills Training"

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When I began to write this paper, I had just finished reading the New York Times for that day. The headlines on the front page for September 6th, 1991 are not unique. With the exception of developments in the Soviet Union, the remaining headline stories all reflect ethical concerns in a variety of arenas:

front men for the Bank of Credit and Commerce International used to illegally acquire American banks,
the bond-trading scandal at Salomon Brothers in New York,
the $40 billion needed to clean up 30 years of illegal waste dumping at nuclear waste sites around the country,
negative television ads targeting democratic senators at the hearing of Judge Clarence Thomas paid for by the same group which used the Willy Horton advertisement to defeat Michael Dukakis,
Unisys, one of the nation's largest military contractors, to pay a record $190 million fine for bid-rigging and procurement fraud,
grand jurors who chose not to indict a Hasidic driver who accidently killed a black child in Brooklyn, touching off several days of riots, and
members of congress who will decide whether or not to comply with President Bush's plea to postpone $10-million loan guarantees for Israel.

Still with us are stories about the failed Savings & Loan scandal, Japanese brokers engaged in rigged transactions, and the recent resignation of Chairman Helmick of the U.S. Olympic Committee over questionable business relationships and conflict-of-interest questions. And, surely, few in America escaped the real-life drama played out in front of the cameras during the recent Thomas confirmation hearings.

No wonder ethics training in a hot topic. A study in 1989 conducted by the Center for Business Ethics at Bently College in Waltham, Massachusetts, 208 of the top 1000 companies in the U.S. have written codes of ethics and 99 have formal ethics training programs. If this is the environment we find ourselves in as consultants to corporate America, it is foolish not to consider our own business ethics.

There is no licensing procedure for the practice of communication consulting. It is very much like psychotherapy in most states - just hang out a shingle. Although many groups, such as the American Management Association and the American Society for Training and Development, have offered a code of ethics, it is up to the individual to adhere to those principles as he or she sees fit. There is no system of evaluation or censure.

In Communication Training and Development, Arnold and McClure (1990) discuss the code of ethics which guides their decision-making process and urge each of us who consult to construct a personal model for ourselves. Over the past six years, a number of principles have become the guidelines which I have formulated for use in my consulting practice. I would like to briefly outline my code, look at a few of the situations where these principles have been used, and reflect on my ethical journey. Here, then, is what I have culled.

## CODE OF ETHICS

### General Points

**I will not conduct training if any of the following external conditions are present:**

1) the training I can provide is not what the company really needs, or
2) the training atmosphere is not positive, or
2) I am unable to interview management and/or employees prior to training, or
3) time frames are too limited to conduct effective training, or
4) training is not supported by management

**I do not cancel training sessions if I receive a more lucrative offer or receive an offer from a bigger "name."**

**I do not offer an "off-the-shelf" training program. Each training program is tailored to a specific client and/or industry.**

**I honor my price quotations** even if I have misjudged my expenses or the amount of time I need for preparation and/or delivery.

**I often offer value added services** to long-standing clients, not-for-profit organizations, and private individuals.

**I will not do less than my best and "take the money and run"** - anyone who serves as a consultant knows that he or she is only as good as the last consulting assignment and your reputation is the solid rock upon which your practice is built.

**I will not tell a client I can do more than I know I can deliver.** Over the years I have had to gently explain that I cannot rewrite media placement campaigns, analyze telephone systems, or fix deviated septums.

### Presentation Skills Specific

**I will not attempt to train in the area of presentation skills if I do not feel comfortable with the time constraints imposed upon me or if the format is unworkable and unlikely to result in any real change.**

**A CASE IN POINT:** I was recently asked by the New York public relations firm of Turner Broadcasting here in Atlanta to prepare a two-day training seminar for 12-15 middle managers and account executives which included these topics: listening skills, presentation skills, sales techniques, conflict resolution, and interpersonal communication. I met with them, explained that they had asked me to undertake mission impossible, and suggested we pare down the topic list. Even with the possibility of two additional trainers, it would have been a tight squeeze. They agree to a more limited scope but by the time they could get the Atlanta group to commit to a date, I was unavailable. Maybe there is a Saint Jude who looks out for consultants.

**I will attempt to change the mindset of a client who insists on an abbreviated format, showing how ineffectively their training dollars will be spent.**

**What Type of Training Do I Consider Effective? How Do We Measure Effectiveness?**

Ethical behavior has a great deal to do with truly effective training. If we cannot offer effective training, how can there be a basis for ethical behavior when we know we are providing something of little worth. In my mind, this is fraud. In presentation skills training, how can the most effective training be conducted? Most often, generic presentation skills training sessions are offered for one or two days to groups of fifteen to twenty. Usually the format used by large training companies is the same: general workshops addressing the use of the body, the voice, stagefright, patterns of organization, and the like, followed by a brief

presentation by the participant on an innocuous topic like, "What I like about my job" or "Quality time spent with my children." Feedback about the quality of the presentation skills is offered by the trainers. Videotaping is often a part of the process and participants are given a reference manual to take back to the work-place. Companies are usually charged $1,000 per participant for this group program.

This type of training format has limited effectiveness for several reasons. Studies of adult learners continually tell us that real change only takes place when learners are highly motivated and see extrinsic rewards (a direct application to job performance or career enhancement) or intrinsic rewards (personal satisfaction) as the result of full participation in the training process. Not only are the topics they are asked to speak about in most generic training programs viewed by trainees as of little worth, the few minutes of feedback from the trainer is hardly worth sitting through two days of general instruction covering information many indicate they already knew.

Training that is offered on-site and tailored to meet the specific needs of staff members is often much more effective for a variety of reasons. Conducted not in a two-day group seminar but in individual sessions over an extended period of time, training makes a quantifiable difference in the quality of presentation skills.

I have developed a model of presentation skills training that has proven effective for a variety of clients, though all training programs vary. Training begins with a brief group session during which an overview of presentation skills and the format of the individual sessions are given. Participants then schedule to meet with me privately for a series of 90-minute sessions over a two-to-three month period. Each session is structured the same way: the trainee delivers a prepared business presentation of approximately fifteen minutes. Business presentations might include a sales pitch to a potential customer, a report to an audit committee, a proposal for additional client services, or a report to management. The presentation is videotaped and viewed by both the participant and myself. After feedback, the presentation is made a second time. The same presentation may be given during a second session and then a new one is prepared for subsequent sessions.

For many busy executives, this is the only format in which they **could** receive training - they are too valuable to be taken out of commission for a two-to-three day group seminar, interrupting service to their own clients. They see a "bottom-line" approach to personalized training, which directly responds to their needs rather than a group session which plows through basics for everyone without specificity. The time is compressed, the activities streamlined, the material more personally relevant and the result more evident.

The value of this format is that the participant is actively involved in the process, not a passive listener. The activity has a direct relationship to "real life," the presentations are those he or she is preparing to make to an actual client or has just completed and are similar to those he or she is likely to make again. All of this underscores what we believe to be true about adult training - that real change only happens over time and with numerous opportunities for them to try out new skills and techniques.

Over the past two years, I have worked with the publisher, editor-in-chief, and director of marketing of the nation's largest computer magazine who went through individualized training. They needed to learn to move from the heavy jargon of the computer world into the mainstream of public audiences as they tour the country with their monthly seminars. They cite increased confidence, smoother public presentations, and a willingness to tackle the new challenges of media appearances.

The bottom line on all of this is that, for me, this is the presentation skills format with which I feel most comfortable. Offering an abbreviated format and purporting to effect the same type of real change is outside of the range of ethical choices with which I am comfortable.

**I will attempt to show how I can structure a more thorough program for the same money as a larger, "buck-shot" approach conducted by a large firm.**

**A CASE IN POINT:** For the past three years, I have worked with the national training office of a "Big Six" accounting firm. Each summer, the firm conducts two-week training seminars on accounting principles and practices for its younger middle managers from around the country. The first year, I simply inherited the presentation skills segment of a larger two-week seminar on Advanced Auditing Procedures which consisted of a two-hour block of presentation basics. Previously, this section was simply assigned to whichever accountant/trainer was available for that block of time. The next day, seminar participants were expected to deliver a team presentation to management incorporating those presentation basics. Needless to say, a short dose of presentation skills was virtually lost on a group scrambling to put together the content of a presentation overnight.

I offered to rewrite the module and to revamp the schedule for the next summer's seminar. My revisions included the placement of the presentation skills workshop earlier in the seminar, a videotaped run-through with the group, and feedback about their performance. I offered to be available for private coaching, and attend final group presentations and to provide group and individual feedback.

This revision was adopted and implemented. Not only did the level of group proficiency increase but seminar participants actively sought out opportunities to work with me on an individual basis and address deficiencies they wished to eliminate. Feedback from accounting firm partners who watched the team presentations indicated that presentation skills were greatly improved from previous years.

I have just finished the seminar series for this year. The firm asked me to build into the ten-day schedule, time for individual, 60-minute coaching sessions in addition to the group workshop and group feedback sessions. The presentation skills portion of the seminar now includes a two-hour workshop, group presentation run through, required individual videotaped coaching sessions, and a final group presentation with feedback from me. In three years, the presentation skills training portion of the seminar has quadrupled in the amount of time allotted to it and moved from a group to an individual focus. This is especially of note in that the total number of days for the entire seminar has been shortened from 14 to 10 days. This firm's commitment to improving instruction and increasing individualized presentation skills training continues even after a merger with another "Big Six" with a national training office of its own.

This same pattern of increased individualized training emerged with the firm's train-the-trainer seminar. The first year, I was asked to simply speak to the firm's instructors for fifteen minutes, explain the presentation skills training portion of the seminar that I would deliver, and underscore the need for strong presentation skills as they, as trainers, moved through accounting principles and practices. The second year, I built into this seminar a workshop not only on platform presentation skills but also material on the adult learner and immediacy in the training setting. Also included were two videotaped coaching sessions with each instructor. Before and after performances were hard to argue with and trainers indicated that they felt better equipped to convey technical information to participants.

**I will decline an engagement if I believe that my name will be associated with a poor seminar or training session.**

**Finally, I will not undertake training if I believe client's motivation to engage my services is questionable.**

I have had the partner of financial services firm tell me that the individual who would be trained was a going to be fired but they wanted to document that he had been given a great deal of opportunity (including presentation skills training) to improve his performance before being fired.

The task, then, is to decide how presentation skills training will be conducted and how its effectiveness can be measured. Based upon an analysis of theories of adult learning, training styles, and training formats, and augmented by practical experience in the field, this author maintains that the most effective training format for presentation skills training is that of individualized, private coaching sessions held over a prolonged period of time. This is in direct contrast to the large group seminars held by the large training firms.

For those of us who serve as trainers and consultants in this area, the ethical choice is to provide only that training which fits a model that will deliver results or walk away.